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Proper 9 • Zechariah 9:9–12 • July 6, 2014

David Peter

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, peterd@csl.edu

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Proper 9 • Zechariah 9:9–12 • July 6, 2014

Context Considerations

It might come as a surprise that this Old Testament text is appointed for the fourth Sunday after Pentecost when we are used to it being read on Palm Sunday. Why does it make an appearance at this time? Most likely, the reason is its thematic association with the Gospel reading, Matthew 11:25–30, in which Jesus describes himself as “gentle and humble in heart.” Similarly, in Zechariah’s oracle the Messiah is depicted as being humble (v. 9).

Another important consideration is that this Sunday falls two days after the celebration of Independence Day in the United States. Many congregations will give some reference to this occasion in the worship service, and the sermon can accommodate this.

Textual Considerations

The book of Zechariah is divided into two main parts. The first, chapters 1–8, delivered between 520 and 518 BC contains apocalyptic visions to encourage the post-exilic community to complete the construction of the temple and so demonstrate faithfulness to God. The second part, chapters 9–14, is composed of two prophetic oracles delivered later (after 480 BC) which look ahead to the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of his kingdom. The text under consideration falls at the beginning of these latter eschatological oracles.

In verse 9, the prophet heralds the coming of the messiah king to and for his people. The people of God (depicted as the daughter of Zion/Jerusalem) are summoned to rejoice and exult at the king’s arrival. He is described as having the attributes of righteousness and humility and of bringing salvation. He is depicted as being “mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” The significance of this posture is threefold. First, it marks the messiah as one who is humble and therefore a servant to those he comes to save. Second, it signals that he arrives in peace, as opposed to riding on a warhorse (note the contrast in verse 10). Finally, it marks him as one of the royal line of David, since the mule (or donkey) was the mount used by David and his sons (2 Sm 13:29, 16:2, 18:9; 1 Kgs 1:33).

Verse 9 announces *that* the king will bring salvation. Verses 10–12 describe *how* he will do so. He disarms those bearing the implements of war and speaks peace (*shalom*) to the nations, reminiscent of the messianic prophecies of Isaiah (2:4, 9:5–7, 11:1–10) and of Micah (5:10–11). He establishes his universal rule over all nations, as earlier prophets had foretold (Ps 22: 27–28; Is 9:7, 66:18–20; Mi 5:4–5; Dn 7:14). Based on the blood of the covenant between Yahweh and his people, the king shall “free your prisoners from the waterless pit,” echoing the promises of liberation by the Servant of Yahweh announced by Isaiah (Is 61:1–2). Those who were formerly imprisoned he will return to the protection (“stronghold”) of God and provide restoration beyond even their original state of security (“I will restore to you double”).

Homiletical Development

The preacher must direct the hearers to the fulfillment of these rich and wonderful promises. Zechariah's oracle points to the person and work of the messiah, and the preacher will do likewise in demonstrating how Jesus of Nazareth fulfills these words. This passage is explicitly quoted in the gospels as referring to Jesus's entry into Jerusalem on the Sunday prior to his crucifixion and resurrection (Mt 21:5; Jn 12:15). There the Servant King, the true Son of David who is "gentle and lowly of heart" (Mt 11:29), embarks on his procession to the cross. Although he is righteous, he is condemned as a criminal in order to bear sinful humanity's unrighteousness and to impart to us his righteousness. He breaks the oppression of sin and Satan, and speaks peace to us. By his "blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28), he sets us free from the waterless pit of hell. His reign is a universal and eternal one, and we are secure in the stronghold of his grace.

As noted earlier, the occasion of this Sunday follows quickly upon the observance of Independence Day in the United States. The sermon might reference this occasion by drawing the parallel between a patriotic parade and the procession depicted in the text. Furthermore, a contrast might be drawn between the rule of the king that is celebrated in the prophecy, and the system of governance in our democratic society today.